The Politics of Public Space, Volume Three

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▼Sarah Lynn Rees presenting at Federation Square as part of *The Politics of Public Space* lecture series. Photo by OFFICE

The following interview with OFFICE draws upon many of ideas that Sarah Lynn Rees presented in the Politics of Public Space lecture series in May 2018.

OFFICE: As non-Indigenous Australians, we must continually educate ourselves on the concept of Country. As a Palawa woman working in Melbourne, do you continue to learn and grow your understanding of Country?

SLR: Yes, always. One way to think about Country is to imagine it as your body. We all have some knowledge about how our bodies function and the networks and systems that keep us alive. We also know that we have the power to maintain our health by the actions we take. We can protect and harm ourselves and each other depending on our environments, or how we treat ourselves and each other. In these ways it's often cause and effect that guides our understanding and our

values and morals that influence us. As we develop more knowledge through experience, we begin to understand why certain things occur. However, we will never have the same amount of knowledge of somebody else's body, how they function, what makes them sick or healthy, what causes them pain or makes them thrive. While there are fundamentals across the existence of humans, each body is built differently, reacts differently to stimuli, is nuanced in its genetic make-up and is influenced by the decisions of those around it.

When we talk about Cultural Authority and Traditional Owners, we are talking about people in a community who have been granted thousands of years of Knowledge about their Country and have the right to speak on its behalf. Culture, Language, Laws and values systems are built around this Knowledge. The only way we, as built environment professionals, can appropriately work on someone else's Country

Illustration based on the Indigenous language groups throughout Australia. Image by Sarah Lynn Rees

is to engage with those who hold Cultural Authority to understand what they deem we need to know about the complexities of their Country's reality.

So in answer to your question, yes I am always and will always be continuing to grow my understanding of the Countries I have the privilege to work on and within. We don't arrive to someone's Country with an automatic understanding of their values. We don't inherently understand their history, language or Law. We have to be taught, and before that we have to show we are responsible enough to be granted Knowledge. So just like every other practitioner who is working on someone else's Country, I also have the responsibility to listen and learn. Otherwise, you're relying on your own understanding of place, language, Law and values that have been built around knowledge of another place, or a colonised place and imposing these on top of a Country where those understandings

may not be appropriate.

OFFICE: This publication looks at the relationship between public and private, but we are conscious that this binary is a new imposition on this continent. How do you see the relationship between public space and Country?

SLR: While different, there are *traditional* notions of public and private in Indigenous communities. Some examples might include men's places and women's places, places for Law, ceremony or sacred places etc. If we are talking about the public spaces in our cities though, I will answer this question with what I hope for public space and Country. I fundamentally believe we should design public spaces that reflect the truth of Country (noting that we as humans are a part of Country). Places that our communities can see themselves reflected in and that celebrate nuances across geographies. Places that proudly express themselves as being *of Country* both in

their cultural expression and the components we use to build them.

If we are talking about public and private outside of metropolitan areas, I can respond to this question from my own personal experience of the Country of one of my ancestors. I grew up and continue to live off the Countries I descend from. A large stretch of one of my ancestors' Countries to the south of Ben Lomond[1] is privately owned, but there is a publicly accessible road that takes you to John Batman's Cottage. We know Batman's history here in Melbourne[2], but before this, in Tasmanian he was a bounty hunter and likely killed many of my ancestors[3]. The reality that the only part of Country that I can access on this privately owned land takes me to the cottage of the guy who killed lots of people from my Country is complex. This is different to a city context, but it may give you an idea of what this feels like.

We need a future where we design

spaces that don't alienate people or natural systems. We need public spaces that are designed to work with Country without positioning human needs above all else. I really can't understand the concept of human-centred design—it just doesn't make a lot of sense. It is an arrogant way to design. We need to understand how we fit into Country and the implications of our actions through design.

OFFICE: Yes and challenging ideas of human-centred design should be part of our response to the effects of climate change. How can a deeper understanding of Country be incorporated into the built environment to counter the destruction that is taking place?

SLR: Projects that have the opportunity to engage with Traditional Owners, respectfully incorporate and be guided by their Cultural Knowledge and contribute to the health of Country and community should be our aim.

However, I think we all understand that not every project undertaken can engage with Traditional Owners. So we really need to approach this from more angles.

From a baseline perspective, the question might then become, how do we design and build on Country in a way that is appropriate without Cultural Knowledge? What can we do when we can't engage? How do we ensure that we're aligning with the values of Country? Or more pragmatically, what is the ultimate 'baseline ethic' we should all be starting from in our work?

I don't hold Cultural Authority so my advice is always to listen to those that do. What I can comment on is what I think our *baseline ethic* as a profession should be. And that is, we need to start from the position of *do no more harm*. This ethic can be about the sustainability of buildings, cultural sustainability and the health of Country and Community for example. However,

it is certainly not an aspirational target, more a fundamental baseline I personally think we should all start from.

My current thoughts on what could have the most impact to support this baseline ethic is working with Traditional Owner Groups to establish rules/protocols/ethics/targets/laws for designing and building on their Country, so that the profession has a documented standard we need to meet that is context specific and ideally written into planning law. Of course it would be great if we all worked this way already, but the planning process can empower good design standards that can't be value managed out by higher powers—and we should embrace the power this system has. This should never negate actual engagement, but it would be one way we could take steps towards working with Country across all projects.

Ultimately, there is no easy way to answer your question. The list is kind of endless. Perhaps a reflection from

architecture school is at least a *way in* to my mindset for our profession and that is the concept of *first principles* design thinking. In architecture school, tutors often spoke about *first principles* and there seemed to be little consistency in how *first principles* is applied in architecture which confused my understanding at university. Even now in design practice people still use it to mean so many different things. For me, it's a process of thinking whereby you question everything that you *know* and assume, until you arrive at the most fundamental truth possible. From here you can then reason and design from this truth, rather than designing from assumption. If we all applied this rigour to what we *know* about Indigenous Australia and took the time to challenge our assumptions, question how we *know* something and if that *how* is sufficient, the conversation might shift dramatically.

OFFICE: We are beginning to see more examples of spaces and objects in Melbourne that use creative solutions to engage with principles of Country. Can you describe some successful works in this space?

SLR: This question worries me, and perhaps I am being overly cautious, however it often comes up as a question in public conversations. *Can you give us some precedents?* I think my fear comes from two places: the first is the way precedents are used in practice and not knowing if the person asking the question is aware that what might be a good example of engagement and design in Geelong could be completely inappropriate in Melbourne let alone somewhere in the Northern Territory or Victoria. Will they use the precedent literally, in terms of spatial design and representation? If so, circle back to the first question of this interview.

The second part that prevents me from feeling comfortable about

responding to this question is that Indigenous architecture projects are equally about (if not more about) the relationships and process undertaken during the design process, and the design outcome. Not being a party involved in the engagement and design process or outcome of projects I've not worked on, and by virtue of the limited incorporation of Traditional Owner perspectives on these projects in the media, it is incredibly difficult to know if the Traditional Owners or relevant Indigenous organisations feel the process and the project are a positive contribution to their community. Therefore any perspective I could give is not really what I am being asked to respond to, because I have no right to overrule the perspectives of Traditional Owners for what is appropriate for their Country.

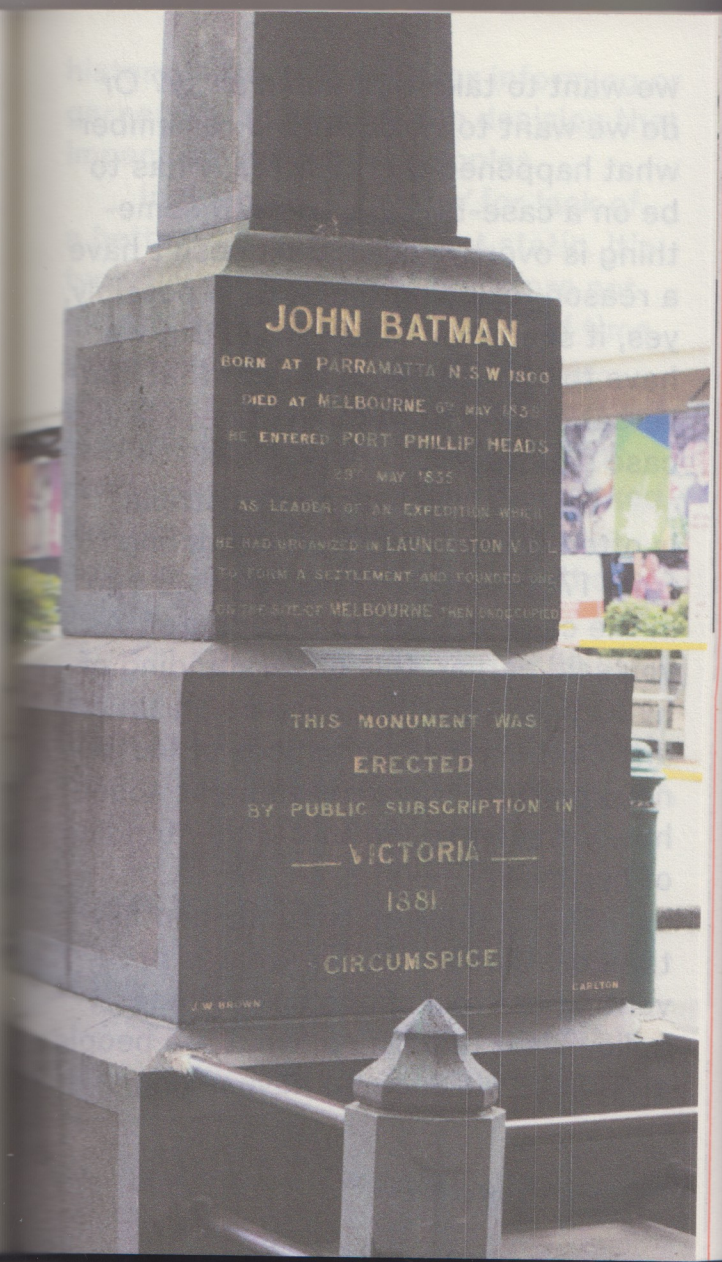
OFFICE: Recently, we have seen examples of monuments being removed as part of the international Black Lives Matter movement. How do you consider this approach to monuments within the city?

SLR: I can't even begin to comprehend the reality of what it would be like in the United States right now. Their experience, like ours, is unique to our respective contexts. While we might have similarities, I do not want to speak on their behalf. We also need to remember that the First Nations population in the US often appears to be left out of these conversations, at least from how it's reported anyway. My issue with monuments here in Australia is whether or not they memorialise the truth. We have a dominant one-sided version of history. Our Country celebrates this history, but these might not actually be truthful accounts.

Memorialising people's names isn't common in Aboriginal culture. We talk about the stories that are embedded with ethics to guide us in how we move around and work with Country.

Really, again, there are no simple answers to your question. If I had to give a coverall response to this question then personally I would support actions where the truth can be told.

If that is adding plaques next to existing statues to tell an account of history that has a truth to it, then I would support that. Sometimes the juxtaposition of narratives is equally as powerful. Some people wouldn't necessarily want to remove statues because that is an erasure of a failing of understanding our history. It's the same with changing the names of places. Do we want to change them? Because that erases the reality of what happened in that place. There are so many examples in Tasmania of different place names that account for massacres or other horrible events that have happened in that area. Do



▲ The John Batman memorial with additional plaque clarifying that 'it is now clear that before the colonisation of Victoria, the land was inhabited & used by Aboriginal people'. Photo by OFFICE

we want to take that name away? Or do we want to sit down and remember what happened there? It really has to be on a case-by-case basis. If something is overtly racist and doesn't have a reason for being there, then possibly, yes, it should be taken away. But we have to consider all facets of that conversation and everything on a case-by-case situation.

OFFICE: Heritage in Australia is often limited to the period dating from 1788 up to around 20 years ago in the case of Federation Square[4]. As you said earlier, this understanding of history excludes both pre-colonisation and contemporary practices of Indigenous culture. Have you thought about how we can expand this understanding of heritage?

SLR: I think more fundamentally the question should be, what is preventing us from changing heritage policy? Is it fear? If so, what are people afraid of? We seem to have a long

history in Australia of fear informing or garnering support for the decision that impact on Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous *'heritage'* for lack of a better word, is active not static. It's typically practised and therefore not generally confined to a period of time. When we overlay a western understanding of heritage, the misalignment of world views is quite evident. Why don't we value a tree that was marked five years ago as part of a cultural process in the same way we do those before 1788?

I'm not well read on heritage policy, it's not my field, so I don't really have an answer. I just hope that what's preventing change is not based on fear, racism, ignorance or cynicism.

OFFICE: Is it about designing spaces that allow culture to be practised rather than memorialising events of the past?

SLR: We somehow still have this lingering idea that Indigenous cultures

stopped in 1788 and contemporary evolutions of culture are less genuine. Every culture evolves. Indigenous cultures have evolved, adapted and survived a lot over the last couple of hundred years. Of course, cultures are going to manifest in different ways and adapt to different environments. How society understands Indigenous cultures also has to change and evolve. I often struggle with the word *authentic* for this very reason. Authentic to when? At what point in time are you drawing a line and deciding this version of culture is *authentic* but anything after isn't? It seems society often holds on to truths of a time that aren't a reality anymore. For example, there is often this idea that photographs of an Indigenous person can't be used if that person has passed away. Photography didn't exist here before non-Indigenous people came to our Countries, so this idea has happened as a result of colonisation. For some communities

photographs might be considered magic, associated with negative spirits, capturing someone's soul or preventing them from passing on, but this too has evolved over time. While there are some communities that don't show photographs of an Indigenous person after they've passed away, other communities embrace images of people who have passed. Cultural practices are not homogenous and cultural practices change.

Perhaps this was more of an extended response to the question before, however in response to your question, yes. It would be a great outcome if our public spaces facilitated the practice of cultures.

OFFICE: Through your work with BLAKitecture[5], how important are these conversations for public discourse?

SLR: I think public discourse is incredibly important. It has always been the intent of our BLAKitecture

yarns at MPavilion to invite the perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and voices across age, genders, experience and profession. We want attendees to hear multiple voices and reinforce that there is no, single, correct way of working with Indigenous peoples. If an attendee at one of our talks leaves with just one altered aspect of how they thought about Indigenous Australia and the possibilities the built environment has to contribute positively to Country and community, then I consider it a success. Collectively as a profession and as a society we have a lot to learn and we need to take our time to ensure we take in the fullest of perspectives. In this way we see BLAKitecture as a small piece in a large puzzle of public discourse that intends to provide accessible insight and shift understanding.

OFFICE: All of the talks in this publication also occurred in public, do

▲ BLAKitecture open public lecture and discussion taking place at the MPavilion. Photo by Anthony Richardson, 2019

you think similar conversations can happen within an institution?

SLR: There are different kinds of conversations that need to happen in different contexts. Educational institutions obviously have a responsibility to educate people coming into the profession. The conversation that needs to occur in this context is more likely to be around the protocols of sharing knowledge, who has the right to teach what and what do we need to teach to prepare students for the future of Indigenised practice. When it comes to government, it's more about power, authority and recognising the rights of Traditional Owners as the Cultural Authority of that place and their communities. It's also about understanding the governance structures of communities and how these two systems can work together.

In a public talk, we're not beholden to any targeted agendas so there is more freedom to explore, speculate and

test ideas across different Countries through listening to their perspectives. I think it is important for these conversations to happen in public and that they are inclusive. We have a responsibility to be open, flexible and see where the conversation goes while also protecting the cultural safety of those that have given their time to share their stories.

OFFICE: Your work focuses on advocacy and changing systems from within, how do you see this in relation to recent protest movements in public spaces that work towards change in a different way?

SLR: Both approaches are completely valid and effective in different circumstances. Also, different people are suited to different approaches. Protest hasn't been a functional way for me to get across my point or the point for those I am representing, essentially I don't respond well to confrontation. I am better suited in

▼ Black (Blak) Lives Matter protest rally in Melbourne saw thousands take a stand against the alarming number of Indigenous Australian deaths in custody. Photo by Konkarampelas

positions where I need to understand how systems work, seek out where they could change and slowly implement said change with the view that if we are slow and incremental we are more likely to get it right.

OFFICE: Do you see your Indigenous advisory role at JCB Architects as a possible model for other design offices?

SLR: I have two roles at JCB. I have the traditional architecture position and I am also what we are calling an Indigenous advisor. The intent of the advisory role is to work both within JCB and other practices, Institutions, and communities. For example, sometimes it is facilitating engagement with Traditional Owners, sometimes it is design review or supporting non-Indigenous peoples in their translation of Indigenous knowledge into design. It is a broad role and I feel this type of

role exists because there aren't enough Indigenous people working in practice and the profession is not yet at a level where this is standard practice. Until that time, a lot of Indigenous people working in architecture will likely be playing this dual role. What I think would be a useful model for practices is to ensure one person on each project is tasked with the responsibility of ensuring Indigenous perspectives are embedded and upheld throughout the life of the project. Having someone be responsible for this might ensure it remains a priority.

Notes

1. Turapina is the palawa kani name for Ben Lomond, a mountain in the north-east of Tasmania.
2. *The Ghost And The Bounty Hunter: William Buckley, John Batman And The Theft Of Kulin Country*, Adam Courtenay, 2020.
3. *The Truth About John Batman: Melbourne's Founder and 'Murderer of the Blacks'*, Nicholas Clements, The Conversation, 2011.
4. *Heritage Council Registrations and Review Committee: Federation Square*, Hearing – 15-17 April 2019.
5. *BLAKitecture* forum brings together Indigenous built environment practitioners to centralise Indigenous voices in conversations about architecture, the representation of histories, the present state and the future of our built environments.

Sarah Lynn Rees

Sarah is a Palawa woman descending from the Aboriginal people of North-East Tasmania and she is also a descendant of convicts from the Cambridgeshire region in England.
Sarah currently works at Jackson Clements Burrows Architects where she's a lead Indigenous advisor in architecture and design. She is program advisor and curator of the BLAKitecture series for MPavilion, a director of Parlour, a member of the Victorian Design Review Panel for the Office of the Victorian Government Architect, and a Fractional Lecturer at Monash University.
Studying at the University of Cambridge her thesis focused on Indigenous housing in remote Australian communities. Sarah's multifaceted practice is geared towards a long-term aim of Indigenising the built environment.

Further Reading

Website

- mpavilion.org/program/blakitecture.iadv.org.au

Articles

- *Our Cities Reflect The Denial of History Blak Design Aims to Change That,* Sarah Lynn Rees: The Guardian, 2018
- *Blakitecture: Beyond Acknowledgment and Into Action,* Sarah Lynn Rees: Architecture Au, 2020
- *Reconciliation Through Architecture: A Chance To Build on The Past,* Sarah Lynn Rees: Monash Lens, 2020